

1.11.2008 - Keeping America Competitive

A safe and modern transportation infrastructure is one of the greatest public services that any government can provide.

It ensures that the nurse gets to the hospital for her shift, enables the working parent to access the day care center, and delivers the eager student to class on time. It allows even those of modest means to build successful careers and get a quality education, keeping competitive jobs and decent wages from going overseas. It is an important vehicle for achieving the American dream and essential to keeping our Nation competitive in the 21st century.

For years our mighty transportation system has been keeping America on the road to success. To continue and build upon this success, however, this system, which was largely built in the 1950s and 1960s, must be well maintained and continually updated.

The world has grown much more compact in recent years, but the importance of transportation infrastructure remains the same. In today's world, getting goods to market requires crossing not just mountains and rivers, but oceans and continents as well.

Across our Nation, far too many counties and communities are still struggling with relative remoteness because of the lack of a good, solid, four-lane highway that allows businesses, new and old, to connect to the global marketplace. It is essential that we continue to invest in our transportation infrastructure that has paved the way to economic opportunity for so many.

With more than 30 years of experience in transportation policy under my belt, it is no coincidence that transportation is the first T of my "three T's" (Transportation, Technology, and Tourism) agenda. I firmly believe that American economic success begins with transportation, through proper investment in community transportation infrastructure and economic development initiatives that will improve the overall strength and stability of West Virginia.

The American transportation system is one of our Nation's greatest achievements and its upkeep must remain one of our highest priorities. Next year, the Congress will begin work on the 2009 federal highway reauthorization, bringing our Nation to a pivotal crossroads.

We are still investing too little in our roads and bridges.

We are falling behind in maintenance, failing to keep up with rising demands for new construction, and putting the competitiveness and economic well-being of our Nation in jeopardy.

As we prepare to craft this bill, we must not forget that an investment in our transportation infrastructure is an investment in our future. Failure of leadership and vision in this area costs more than dollars; it costs lives.

West Virginians have long recognized the importance of highways to economic development. Without good roads, our mountain communities have found it impossible, or nearly so, to attract new businesses and to sufficiently grow jobs.

A broad spectrum of talents and expertise is available in our state but a sufficient transportation infrastructure must be in place to ensure that this region is economically prosperous and competitive in the years ahead. Proof that highways do make a difference is evident in the bustling new business complexes and construction sites springing up along modern highways throughout the region.

In Mercer County, dozens of financial institutions, retail stores, restaurants, and motels have flocked to the City of Princeton to tap into the whirl of economic activity created by the intersection of U.S. Route 460 and Interstate 77.

Construction on the Indian Ridge Industrial Park in McDowell County and the King Coal Highway in Mingo County are two more success stories. In areas where major highway construction can cost from \$10 to \$30 million per mile and take decades to plan and build, County Redevelopment Authorities and the State Highway Division are teaming up with coal companies to speed along construction and trim millions off project costs.

The marriage of mining lands and roadbed has proved to be a most opportune pairing that is saving the taxpayers precious dollars and helping to speed along the construction of new mileage. Plans for additional public-private partnerships, including one to assist with the construction of the Coalfields Expressway, are in the works for areas near Pineville and Mullens in Wyoming

County.

That same innovative thinking has turned mining lands into a successful fish hatchery, a golf course, industrial parks, and tourism sites. These accomplishments are just scratching the surface of the potential economic development that is possible when we properly invest in our transportation infrastructure.

I look forward to working with public and private transportation entities to secure committed funding for these projects, which are crucial to keeping America competitive in the global economy. By coming together and pooling our minds, our muscle, and yes-our money-ingenious West Virginians can tackle age-old challenges and craft creative solutions that will give our state a competitive edge for years to come.